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Citation

ONG, Siow-Heng. Case studies for teaching stylistics for business communication. (2009). *Journal of Organizational Behavior Education*. 2, 47-55. Research Collection Lee Kong Chian School Of Business.

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Case Studies for Teaching Stylistics for Business Communication

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Published in Journal of Organizational Behavior Education, Vol. 2, (2009): 47-55.

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Abstract

The employment of stylistics can influence the effectiveness of a brochure, pamphlet, press release and other forms of business communication dramatically. When we consider that the language used to formulate the texts of these publicity materials has the potential to generate hundreds of thousands of dollars in sales, we do well to pay attention to how stylistics can be applied persuasively. This paper provides a theoretical framework for the mother of all stylistics, the metaphor. Examples of how metaphors are used to persuade are then discussed in prominent speeches and other texts. Finally, analytical and constructive assignments are posed and suggestions are offered to explain the legitimacy of stylistic choices and their persuasive appeal.

Keywords: metaphor, stylistics, teaching stylistics, business communication.

1. Introduction

The writing of press releases, sales brochures, marketing proposals and the like requires communication competencies. This necessarily encompasses lessons on how to employ stylistics such as metaphors to make communication artefacts more lucid and vivid. Here, two texts are used as case studies to illustrate the idea of metaphorical concepts and to discuss how the application of metaphorical concepts aids in capturing audience attention.

2. Theory of Metaphor

The first extensive treatment of metaphor by a philosopher was by Aristotle in *Rhetoric* (Aristotle, 1932) and *Poetics* (Aristotle, 1984). In *Poetics*, Aristotle defined metaphor as “giving the thing a name that belongs to something else” or “transference” of the name from “genus to species or from species to genus, or from species to species, or on grounds of analogy” (1457b). Unfortunately, this initial definition of metaphor as a name being transferred from an original application to a secondary application paved the way for subsequent thought on metaphor centred on words, taken in isolation, rather than on how metaphors function as part of the whole system of linguistic communication and thought process.

I. A. Richards (1936) suggested how metaphors work. He regarded them as “two thoughts of different things active together and supported by a single word, or phrase, whose meaning is the resultant of their interaction” (p. 92). The metaphorical meaning is thus the interaction of two different groups of thought about two different things, which interact with each other and produce meaning. This interaction is supported by one word or phrase. Hence, in “the world is a carnival”, the two groups of thought comprising the metaphor are, in Richards' terms, the tenor (the world) and the vehicle (carnival). Interaction between the two creates the resultant meaning. Interestingly, this resultant meaning is not necessarily the similarities between “carnival” and “world”. The meaning could be based on dissimilarities to stimulate the audience's imagination. It also need not involve images (e.g. colourful carnival). It can include ideas or concepts (e.g. a carnival is briefly exciting then unceremoniously over). Since the meaning is a result of this unique interaction of the two groups of thought, the metaphor cannot be substituted by literal paraphrase. Because substitution is not possible, metaphors are obviously indispensable to human thought.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) fine-tuned this view to a system of metaphoric concepts. They then used this system of concepts to explain how metaphors work. They argued that all actions, events and objects are understood in terms of our experience. The complex relationship of the various aspects of our experience of an action, event or object forms a composite. When we encounter a metaphor, we understand one composite experience in terms of another. Thus, the metaphorical meaning is based upon the projection of one composite experience onto another. What emerges is a new experience that reshapes aspects of our experience, thought and language.

Lakoff's and Johnson's system is based on the idea that we carry understanding in clusters or categories of thought. These clusters are formed from our experiences of life and from our observations and perceptions. The only reason we use these expressions without being consciously metaphorical is that these expressions have become so much a part of everyday use.

The example that follows illustrates Lakoff's and Johnson's notion of metaphorical concepts and clusters:

3. Illustration

Read the following excerpt from Martin Luther King Jr's “I Have a Dream Speech” (King, 1963):

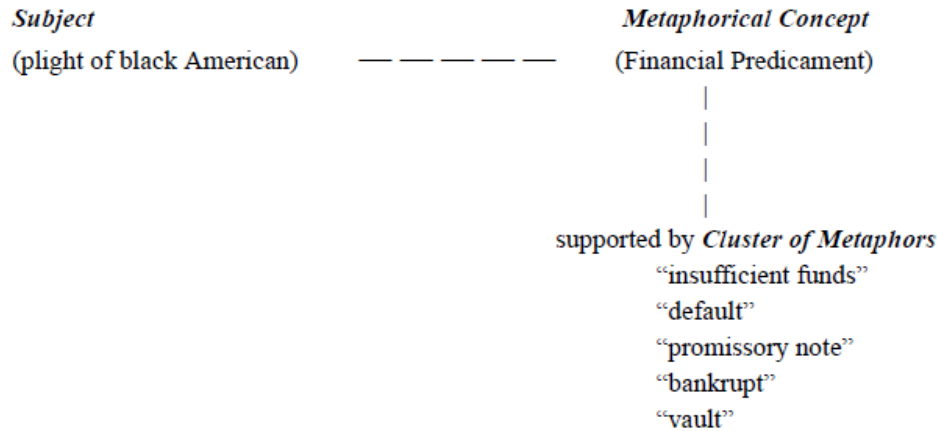
But one hundred years later, we must face the tragic fact that the Negro is still not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. So we have come here today to dramatize an appalling condition.

In a sense we have come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men would be guaranteed the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check which has come back marked "insufficient funds". But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this check - a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice. We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to open the doors of opportunity to all of God's children. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood.

In this speech, King compares the plight of the black American (subject) to a financial predicament (metaphorical concept). Lakoff and Johnson suggest that for a metaphorical concept to be memorable and persuasive, it has to be supported by a cluster of related metaphors that bolster it. In King's speech, the cluster of related metaphors that support the metaphorical concept of a financial predicament include "cash a check", "promissory note", "bad check", "insufficient funds", "default" and "bankrupt." These metaphors belong to a litany of words that describe financial dilemma.

Using Lakoff's and Johnson's explication of metaphor, we become aware that an effective way to create a metaphor would be to first invent a metaphorical concept to compare a subject to. In "I Have a Dream", King is describing the plight of the black American. He uses the language of financial/banking problems. The metaphors such as "insufficient funds", "default", "promissory note", "bankrupt", "vault", etc form a cluster of words that strengthen and reinforce the metaphorical concept of financial predicament:



For his metaphorical concept to work well, King employs a cluster of metaphors and is relentlessly faithful to it. King's model provides a lesson for us - to avoid using any other metaphors that detract from the metaphorical concept. Mixed metaphors undermine the purpose of the metaphorical concept and diminish its effectiveness.

4. Analysis

Now read the following excerpt from "Permission Marketing" (Godin, 1999):

A Permission Marketer goes on a date. If it goes well, the two of them go on another date. And then another. Until, after ten or twelve dates, both sides can really communicate with each other about their needs and desires. After twenty dates, they meet each other's families. And finally, after three or four months of dating, the Permission Marketer proposes marriage.

Permission Marketing is just like dating. It turns strangers into friends and friends into lifetime customers. Many of the rules of dating apply, and so do many of the benefits.

Every marketer must offer the prospective customer an incentive for volunteering. In the vernacular of dating, that means you have to offer something that makes it interesting enough to go out on a first date. A first date, after all, represents a big investment in time, money and ego. So there better be reason enough to volunteer.

Without a selfish reason to continue dating, your new potential customer (and your new potential date) will refuse you a second chance. If you don't provide a benefit to the consumer for paying attention, your offer will suffer the same fate as every other ad campaign that's vying for their attention. It will be ignored.

The incentive you offer to the customer can range from information, to entertainment, to a sweepstakes, to outright payment for the prospect's attention. But the incentive must be overt, obvious and clearly delivered.

This is the most obvious difference between Permission Marketing and Interruption Marketing. Interruption Marketers spend all of their time interrupting strangers, in an

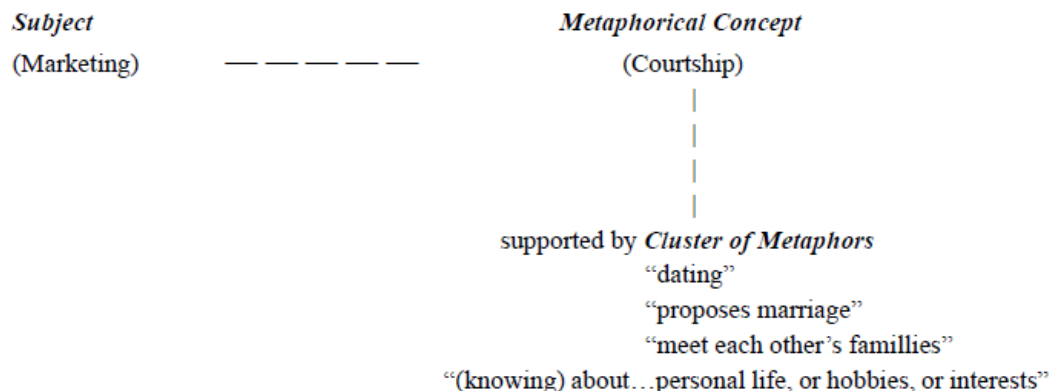
almost pitiful attempt to bolster popularity and capture attention. Permission Marketers spend as little time and money talking to strangers as they can. Instead, they move as quickly as they can to turn strangers into prospects who choose to “opt-in” to a series of communications.

Second, using the attention offered by the consumer, the marketer offers a curriculum over time, teaching the consumer about the product or service he has to offer. The Permission Marketer knows that the first date is an opportunity to sell the other person on a second date. Every step along the way has to be interesting, useful and relevant.

The third step involves reinforcing the incentive. Over time, any incentive wears out. Just as your date may tire of even the finest restaurant, the prospective customer may show fatigue with the same repeated incentive. The Permission Marketer must work to reinforce the incentive, to be sure that the attention continues. This is surprisingly easy. Because this is a two-way dialogue, not a narcissistic monologue, the marketer can adjust the incentives being offered and fine tune them for each prospect.

Along with reinforcing the incentive, the fourth step is to increase the level of permission the marketer receives from the potential customer. Now I won't go into detail on what step of the dating process this corresponds to, but in marketing terms, the goal is to motivate the consumer to give more and more permission over time. Permission to gather more data about the customer's personal life, or hobbies, or interests. Permission to offer a new category of product for the customer's consideration. Permission to provide a product sample. The range of permission you can obtain from a customer is very wide, and limited only by its relevance to the customer.

The metaphorical concept in the excerpt from “Permission Marketing” is that marketing is like dating. The cluster of related metaphors that shore up the metaphorical concept of an execution scene include “rapid inspirations”, “survive”, “cease”, “gallows scene” and “breathing rate slowed.”



Like “I Have a Dream” the cluster of metaphors that is employed is dedicated and faithful to the metaphorical concept.

5. Assignments

A. Analytical Assignment

In speeches made by leaders of corporations and countries, metaphors are often used to exhort the audience to consider issues in a new light. Metaphors help the audience to willingly accept change and follow their leader down a new path.

The following is an excerpt from a speech by Mr Goh Chok Tong, Prime Minister of Singapore entitled “Economic Recovery, Education and Jobs” (Goh, 1986).

Since our costs have become uncompetitive, the least we must do is to cut costs. The strategy for economic recovery is essentially a simple one. But not painless. We are warring against recession and we must be prepared to make sacrifices to defeat it. In our battle against recession, we shall employ the classic military pincer strategy.

We move against high costs by cutting them down decisively. Simultaneously, we move against the contraction in economic growth by investing more in human resources and productive capacity. This two-pronged attack - costcutting and more investment - will trap and defeat the recession. Cost reduction will make us more competitive. Investment in human resources will make us more skilled and capable.

The pincer strategy requires effort and sacrifice to succeed. It demands that we go on combat ration for a while. Are we prepared to sacrifice part of our wages, which have become too high, to beat the recession?

The subject is “economic stagnation”. The speaker uses metaphors to persuade his audience to think of the economic situation in a certain way. Analyse the excerpt to identify the metaphorical concept and the cluster of metaphors that support it.

B. Constructive Assignment

In sales, management and marketing, the language of metaphorical concepts can persuade. The idea of metaphorical concepts and clusters of metaphors can be applied in the business world. The task before you is to sell a condominium development called “Floravale” and tell potential clients that this development has condominiums of different sizes (studio, 1-bedroom, 2-bedroom and 3- bedroom) which are typically described in condominium brochures insipidly as “Type 1”, “Type 2”, “Type 3”, “Type 4”. Construct a metaphorical concept and accompanying cluster of metaphors that is both memorable and persuasive.

Subject

("Floravale" condominium)

— — — — —

Metaphorical Concept

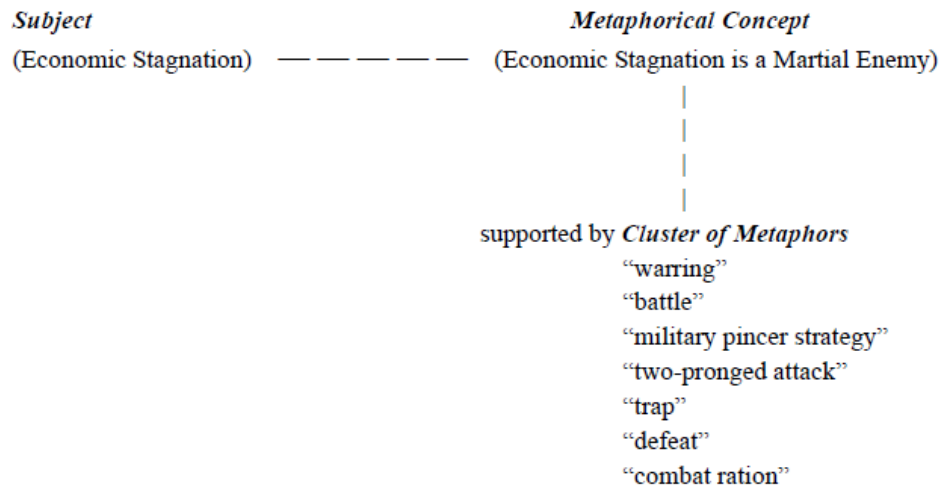
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supported by *Cluster of Metaphors*

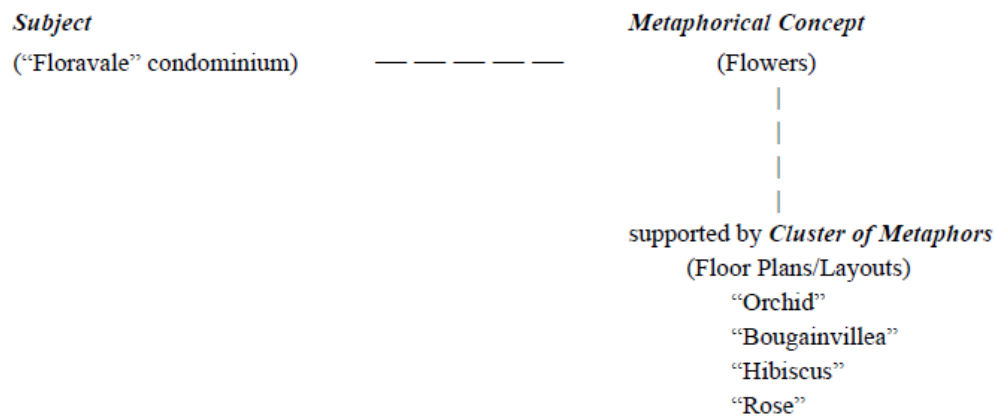
6. Instructor's Notes

A. This is a possible response to Assignment A:



B. This is a possible response to Assignment B:

Floor plans for condominiums are traditionally and drearily labeled “Type 1”, “Type 2”, “Type 3” and “Type 4”. By using the metaphorical concept of “flowers”, an inventive cluster of metaphors that is created:



7. Conclusion

Not all press releases, sales brochures and marketing mailers are given a second look or in-depth scrutiny. Audiences gravitate towards communication that is vivid, vibrant and vivacious. The employment of apt metaphorical concepts and clusters of metaphors has the potential to help sustain audiences' interest and attention.

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